

**On Latinx Poetics:**  
Black Feminist Interventions with the Latin “X”

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## Dedication

My mother is not the kind  
of person who buries the placenta:  
plants a tree on it, puts my DNA in  
some plum, or fig.

Nah, my mother is the ER nurse  
who delivers the afterbirth  
and tries to slide it on a metal dolly  
but misses—or so she tells me.

She tells me of a man who walked  
in to San Antonio Memorial  
covered tip to tip in red paint—  
the kind you put on tacky kitchen walls.  
Now who told him that  
lacquering his skin  
was an okay thing to do?

An okay thing to do is to tell  
the fifth brown boy of the night  
that he's gonna make it. That his  
momma's on the way. That his friends  
are okay—or so she tells me.

And she tells me of her childhood, built on  
knock-off American Girls. On their plastic arms  
3-inch nails plunge  
dark holes, shots in a game  
of pretend nurse.  
They are pupils, iris:

look through these arms' eyes; see the  
camera obscura.

On the other side  
is my mother thirty-five  
working the night shift daily.

A man handcuffed to bed rail  
punctuates one graveyard stint.  
She knows what he did,  
is that his brother in the corner?  
Does she fear the coroner?  
Does he sleep like a baby.

There are different kinds of shine

here. There's the glint of maggots  
that sterilize a man's leg, disinfected  
a week in the street. There's the  
fluorescence of hallways, brimmed in  
bleach lightning. And there's my mother's smile  
when she speaks of her children,  
even those she cares for as a school  
nurse these days. Does she regret it.

No—or so she tells me.

**Thank you**

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to my friends and loved ones, for a healthy year

## **Preface: Why “I” Am Here**

*“If I sound conflicted, it’s because I am.” –Patricia Engel*

I was known as Dusty McClean in the summer of 2016. I was working at a dude ranch, where city-slickers—New Yorkers, white people, rich people, snap-at-you-for-a-new-bowl-of-lemons people—came to southern Colorado near the Great Sand Dunes in the San Luís Valley to receive one week of the Western Experience. I, the Western Experience. Their housekeeper in boots and a cowboy hat. Their waiter in a black smock. At their service, while they rode horses and scenic trains for a couple thousand in advance. I ate leftover flank steaks from the walk-in freezer at three am.

At the beginning of the workweek, guests had an orientation hour. Families packed under taxodermied cougar and buck. Twenty children. Fifty adults. Thirty old ladies each of whom I begged to be my partner in the Friday night square dance. I moved to the Boot Scoot Boogie. Orientation hour: I represented the housekeepers, where I was to present the Golden Dustpan. The one we’d spray-painted an hour before. The one guests won if they cleaned their own cabins the best by the end of the week. (A cheap trick.) I needed to capture this audience, I needed Ms. Hoffman and Dr. Smith from Manhattan to love me. So, I became Dusty McClean, the man who burst from the back of the audience. He had two housekeepers trailblazing ahead, with brooms, dusting the walkway as if Dusty were a curling puck. He had paper towels stuffed in the collar. A ten-gallon hat. Two bottles of Windex, which sprayed and twirled like a couple of Colt Single Actions. “Ladies and Gentlemen,” Dusty bellowed. He’s about to give his monologue, the one where he was born in a canyon, the one where he was raised to clean the dust off the West, the

very West that this dude ranch was supposedly founded upon. “Can I Get a Hey!” The crowd responds: *Hey!* “Howdy!” *Howdy!* “HEY!” *HEY!*

I’m Latinx. No, I’m not. My mom is. No, she isn’t. “I’m Tejana,” she tells me. *De San Antonio.* No, I won’t code-switch. That’s not me. Maybe it is. At the dude ranch, I was white. Like my Dad. Who’s definitely white. *De Durham.* Dusty McClean was white. He cleaned the canyon, right? Settled the Wild West with Windex. Except for the fact that his performance ended after five minutes and an applause. After that, Dusty McClean lost his sheen. He became me.

Month Two, Day Six: I sulk back to my room, tired of eating flank steak every other day. My boys are in their bunks. Lebs, Harrison, Sam. Good ‘ol boys. I am a good ‘ol boy, too. I think, let’s get some drinks, boys. They’re laughing when one of them queries, “Hey Alex, how big’s your dick?”

They were children like that. Perhaps this is a child’s story. Underdeveloped. Can’t we get past the shock value of dick? Of hyper-masculinity? (*But wait, there’s more!*) Lebs eyed me as he laid in bed in his boxers. “Nah,” he said. “Mexicans got tiny dicks.”

Now I’m in it. Now I’m a voice with racial and sexual panache. Here I might speak of the time I played baseball in elementary school. I might speak of my team that was called the Texas Rangers. Namesake to the bands of state-sanctioned vigilantes that enforced Anglo domination in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century U.S./Mexico borderlands. There’s an exhibit at the Bob Bullock museum in Austin that recalls the era of these proto-border patrol agents. It’s called *La Matanza*. Sixth grade, baseball, I’m a Texas Ranger. I’m brown, because it’s summer. “No, I don’t need any sunscreen, thank you. I don’t burn.” (My mantra.) On the back of my baseball cap, our team

mother has embroidered a nickname: *Speedy Gonzales*. Better than *Mad Tejano* from last year's cap. I might go on to speak of the brands of racism and homophobia I've experienced in my life.

But that's not what I'm here for.

I look white. You—the reader—probably don't care, though.

I had a donut and coffee for breakfast.

No, it's not like that.

I don't mean to say it doesn't matter.

I mean bodies matter.

You don't have to care about mine, though.

This is a thesis regarding intersectionality with assemblage theory, on the signifier Latinx, and on poetic methodologies that can mitigate violence against racialized queer bodies.

Don't think that I'm here to write a diary for the sake of spilling my guts. No, I take that back. My personal narratives are here for my feelings, for my own sake. Perhaps you are not here for that. That could be a good thing.

Let's think about the "I" in practices of theorizing. Gayatri Spivak sheds light on the invisible intellectual who does not avow the "contradiction within a position that valorizes the concrete experience of the oppressed [while simultaneously] being so uncritical about the historical role of the intellectual."<sup>1</sup> The European intellectual—Foucault and Deleuze, for Spivak—only speaks *for* the oppressed masses. Theirs is an invisible social location. Theirs is a concrete standpoint that is displaced by the Western intellectual's claim to represent the subaltern, thus rendering the notion of Europe and the West an effaced subject. Always present and never avowed. This invisible subject becomes universal; unspoken, implied, Spivak claims

that Western intellectual theory is a body of work that purports to be bodiless. Donna Haraway calls this the “god-trick.” She is talking about “the conquering gaze from nowhere. This is the gaze...that makes the unmarked category [of Objective Science, the West, the White Man] claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation.”<sup>2</sup> The trick is that the social categories most invested with systemic power claim to be voiceless—not the disempowered kind, but the ventriloquist kind, as this is a claim, a trick—while operating a monopoly on the voices of those rendered as the “Other.” Spivak calls it contradiction, Haraway calls it a god-trick: systems of theory invested in hegemonic power—represented by the unconscious paternalism of Foucault and Deleuze’s leftist orientations—are often crafted as impersonal, invisible, and bodiless.

Patricia Hill Collins localizes and mobilizes Spivak’s and Haraway’s illumination of the disembodied Western intellectual. Collins is speaking as a black feminist. She locates black women in academia as “outsiders within,” as they carry incisive analyses toward the operations of race, class, and gender in spaces catered to the white man, the Western intellectual. For Collins, black women are “within” academia (specifically sociology) via “sociology’s lengthy socialization process...[where they] acquire the insider skills of thinking in and acting according to a sociological worldview.” Yet, black women remain “outside” academia: “black women’s efforts in dealing with the interlocking systems of oppression...produce a standpoint quite distinct from, and in many ways opposed to, that of white male insiders.”<sup>3</sup> Collins goes on to note the benefits of centering an “outsider within” perspective. Namely, black women have the ability to perceive “anomalies” in privileged institutional spaces (e.g. the lack of statistics on black women in the United States is not perceived by the white male “insider” or by the non-academic “outsider” who does not analyze social statistics). While Collins cautions against an

overreliance on identity, she calls for theory that is informed by one's social location (in academia, in political struggles, amidst racial and gendered constructions, etc.). This thesis emphasizes embodiment as it inflects social location. The invisible Western intellectual is "seen" through the embodied perspectives of those who face the most marginalization, such as black women in sociology.

Let's pause here. I showed my cards too early. *I look white*. Yes. I'm also not from a low-income family, and I've four years of education from Duke University. This is a far cry from the "outsider within" subjectivity for which Collins advocates. I'm an insider; I'm in too deep. It is insufficient to say that I include personal narrative in this thesis to uncover the bodies in disembodied Western modes of theorizing through Collins' understanding of "outsider within" interventions. Instead, I am locating a genealogy through Collins. The idea that lived experience is a valid and perceptive lens to theorize from and about is a thoroughly black feminist notion. As a coalition of black women, many of whom were lesbians, the seminal black feminist Combahee River Collective informs this recognition: "We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity." They continue, "There is undeniably a personal genesis for black feminism, that is, the political realization that comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual black women's lives."<sup>4</sup> This stance substantiates the notion that black women's personal narratives can uncover the disembodied nature of Western intellectualizing. (We can recognize the risk of romanticizing black women's subjectivities here, that subjugated perspectives are not "clean" or homogenously "useful" for theoretical purposes. More on this later.)

So, what am “I” doing here? Maybe I’m destined to be caught in the middle. I am bisexual, after all. (Too much?). Half-white, half-Latinx. Half-straight, half-gay. Yet, I refuse these significations. Here’s what I’m getting at: women of color feminisms, specifically black feminism,<sup>a</sup> have paved the path for the validation of lived experience in/as theory. This contradicts the Western intellectual’s validation as speaker for the subaltern (the discursive ventriloquist). My personal narratives do not speak from women of color feminist perspectives—but these perspectives inform my voice. I legitimate my personal narrative to give myself a body in this theoretical text. I speak as a subject with privilege. And without privilege. If Western theorizing is a ventriloquist’s act, then, at the very least, watch my lips move as I offer this intentionally bad performance.

I want you to do something with “me,” in here: don’t care about me. Listen to me first, though. Then go on, do your thing. This is the methodology I am looking for, which I’m calling a Latinx poetics. A Latinx poetics locates and hears bodies—imperfect, angry, contradictory bodies. A Latinx poetics hears the prescription of these bodies: *I am white: I am privileged: I am the oppressor*. Or this prescription: *I am Latinx: I am oppressed: Kind of: I am brown, ally to black*. Critically, a Latinx poetics takes these prescriptions, listens to their case. And then it says: hm. People are complex. Let’s move on from there.

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<sup>a</sup> I will clarify later in this thesis that black feminism often becomes the primary referent for women of color feminism, especially in the context of intersectionality. This slippage in terminology not only occurs in academic and popular discourse, but within this thesis as well. There are certain erasures that arise from this slippage—i.e. the erasure of the standpoint of black Latinx women—and this thesis does not entirely escape that particular form of erasure. More on this later.

## **Introduction: Black Feminism and the Latin “X”**

A *Latinx poetics* is movement: it is the constant vacillation between Latinx bodies and the recognition that there is no single Latinx body. Both my own body and the body of this text—as both make claims toward the nature of Latinx—are variables within this formula. (Another reason I include personal narrative in this thesis.) This thesis examines the relationship between identity-based claims to the term “Latinx” and anti-essentialist claims regarding this same signifier. Often, these claims contradict one another. This is further complicated by the fact that there is no single consensus toward a monolithic identity-based view of Latinx or a singular anti-essentialist claim toward Latinx.

In part, I am working through a few robust debates in gender, sexuality, and feminist studies. What is the relationship between nature and culture? What is the relationship between identity politics and anti-essentialist theory? Is identity politics coextensive with nature, anti-essentialism with culture? I explore these debates through the term Latinx.

I am offering this signifier as a case study for two main reasons. 1) I have a personal relationship to Latinx. It’s a simple idea, but it’s true, I study the term Latinx because I often identify with the term, and my friends use it to describe my community. I have a personal stake in the matter. 2) Latinx is in the midst of an exciting political and cultural moment. It is a recent term,<sup>b</sup> and there are myriad think-pieces making the rounds on the internet regarding whether or

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<sup>b</sup> There is a robust archive of Latina feminism to which “Latinx” certainly has some attachments. The work of Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, Chela Sandoval, and Norma Alarcon, to name a few, have been instrumental in formulating the relationship between Latinidad and Feminism. However, this thesis does not primarily focus on the relationship between Latinx and Latina feminism. The “x” is critical in this postulation, as it represents a distinct relationship to contemporary popular discourses of intersectionality and the proliferation of identity terms via the internet. Perhaps this is a matter of space—within this thesis, I have chosen to show how the “x” speaks to black feminism and queer theory more often than it speaks to Latina feminism, though this is not to claim that the *only* reading of Latinx is one that does not include a

not people should use the term Latinx. (Latinx has gained so much momentum—and backlash—that a recent article in *Latino Rebels* claimed that current deployments of Latinx are “a purely tyrannical and oppressive act of silencing.”<sup>5</sup>) Plainly, lots of people are really passionate about Latinx right now, so it makes for a robust contemporary case study regarding the aforementioned debates in gender, sexuality, and feminist studies.

But I also want to locate Latinx as a case study that reflects a more localized, specific debate regarding the relationship between intersectionality (which is often implicitly read as black feminism) and assemblage theory. For now, I offer a couple working (and contested) definitions for clarity. Intersectionality is “the notion that [identity] is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality.”<sup>6</sup> Intersectionality looks at the interaction of various identity categories to analyze the ways violence differentially impacts multiply marginalized people (often in reference to black women). Assemblage theory is less wed to deploying social categories to understand identity, focusing “not on content but on relations, relations of patterns.”<sup>7</sup> Contemporary developments of assemblage theory have strong ties to queer theory via its anti-essentialist leanings: that is, assemblage theory does not locate stable or normative notions of identity as the subject of its analysis. By focusing on relations and movement rather than “content,” assemblage theory seeks to destabilize categories of race, gender, sexuality, and class in favor of analyzing the forces that mark subjectivity as tenuous.<sup>c</sup>

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negotiation with the archive of Latina feminism. I depart from a focus on the archive of Latina Feminism to analyze the contemporary and unique production of Latinx on social media and the internet in conversation with black feminism and queer theory.

<sup>c</sup> Often, I will use the term “identity” when speaking to the categories/social vectors that are analyzed in terms of intersectionality. Identity, as I understand it, is a term that relies on stabilized categories of race, gender, class, etc. Alternatively, I often use the term “subjectivity” when analyzing queer/assemblage theory, as it seems less wed to definitions of race, gender, class, etc. In assemblage theory, I find that the notion that “subjectivity is tenuous” is more accurate than

These two theoretical frameworks are often portrayed as diametrically opposed. The perceived difference with regard to deploying subjectivity vs. destabilizing subjectivity is the mark of an intersectionality/assemblage theory antagonism.

There are two key figures that I engage in this thesis to map this antagonism. Jennifer Nash and Jasbir Puar are widely understood as “critics” of intersectionality—both provide insightful analyses of the problematics regarding contemporary deployments of the term. Ultimately, Nash and Puar inform us that in popular and academic feminism, intersectionality and assemblage theory are set up as antagonistic territories of black feminism and queer theory, respectively. As I outline this antagonism, I want to be clear that I don’t necessarily espouse this binary, nor do I reject it. I am merely following Nash and Puar to understand the material effects that the intersectionality/assemblage antagonism produces in academia and in the lived experiences of marginalized people. Furthermore, I don’t mean to say that Nash is seen as a black feminist in contrast to Puar as a queer theorist (on the contrary, Nash does some work to reclaim Puar as a black feminist critical thinker). These figures weave in and out of this thesis to demonstrate the ways in which the term “intersectionality” contextualizes debates on the perceived territories of “Latinx.”

It’s not that intersectionality is to be understood as the originary precedent to the term Latinx. Rather, by locating debates on the term Latinx amidst robust debates on intersectionality, I am looking for the reparative potential<sup>d</sup> of a *black feminist poetics*. I argue that Latinx poetics

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“identity is tenuous.” Though these terms are not strictly interchangeable, this thesis deploys each term with the understanding that they are close in meaning.

<sup>d</sup> More on the “reparative” in a bit. Briefly, reparative acts imagine social possibilities in which current notions of identity—and the violence that is currently prescribed to the differentiated power relations between these identities—are not the *only* future we can imagine. The reparative seeks to “open up” the possibility of a less violent world, not only through political navigation, but through poetic imagination.

work not to appropriate black feminist labor, but to be in conversation and in coalition with a black feminist poetics.<sup>e</sup> “Poetics,” in this instance, signifies language that insists on seeing the world anew; poetic language “defamiliarizes”<sup>f</sup> notions of intersectionality and racialized queer identities in black feminism and in Latinx contexts (as I contend in chapter 5). I offer that poetics orient Latinx in coalition with black feminism through Cathy Cohen’s formulation in “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” In this essay, Cohen calls for “the coalitions we create [to be] ...rooted not in our shared history or identity, but in our shared marginal relationship to dominant power which normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges.”<sup>8</sup> While Cohen is specifically speaking to the radical potential of movement-building, I claim that Latinx poetics share a “marginal relationship to dominant power” with black feminist poetics. Both black feminist poetics and Latinx poetics have investments in the material experiences of racialized queer bodies and in the destabilization of identity categories. What does it mean to understand that a Latinx poetics is speaking toward a longer tradition of black feminism, one that is not relegated to the past, but is instead poetically informing reparative world-making visions? How is the reparative work of Latinx poetics already (and continually) performed through the work of black feminist poetics?

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<sup>e</sup> Throughout this thesis, I will continue to qualify that a distinction between black feminism and Latinx theory erases the perspectives and theorizing of afro-latinx identity. A more nuanced understanding of Latinx might account for the interactions of Latinx and black feminism in terms of afrolatinidad. However, this thesis cedes this point, and relies on a division between Latinx and blackness to highlight the ways that Latinx is often *perceived* as distinct from blackness. This perception has material effects on the lives of black (including black Latina) women: this thesis describes and complicates these material effects, even as it perhaps reiterates these effects along the way.

<sup>f</sup> Defamiliarization is a term coined by Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky, referring to the work that poetic language performs to “make the familiar strange,” which is to see objects through new perspectives. See chapter 4.

I turn toward two texts throughout this thesis to exemplify black feminist poetics in conversation with Latinx poetics. While each can contingently be read as a black feminist and Latinx text respectively, I ultimately show that discrete designations contradict the poetic nature of each text. The first is Alexis Pauline Gumbs's *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity*, which is a book written as a series of vignettes regarding black women in domestic situations.<sup>9</sup> Each vignette ends with a footnote that references a moment in Hortense Spillers' black feminist theoretical work. I draw attention to the poetic language in *Spill* and its relationship to black feminist theory to show how poetics complicate notions of proprietorship regarding the term intersectionality. As an analog that speaks in conversation with *Spill*, I offer Giannina Braschi's *Yo-Yo Boing!* as contingently representative of Latinx poetics.<sup>10</sup> *Yo-Yo Boing!* deploys rambling passages that vacillate between Spanish and English. The text complicates stable notions of identity by laying multiple contingent claims to concrete identity—a contradiction that I see at the heart of Latinx poetics. This thesis engages how poetic language in conjunction with identity-based signifiers achieves a sense of reparative ambivalence; black feminist poetics ambivalently negotiate attachments to identity with the notion that subjectivity is tenuous.<sup>§</sup> Through poetic language, I reach an understanding that Latinx is a contingent term, that there is ambivalence in its meaning, and that this ambivalence produces possibilities through which violence can be mitigated against racialized queer bodies.

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<sup>§</sup> There may be similar ambivalence *within* the terms “black” and “feminist.” For example, afro-latinx identity highlights the tenuousness of a homogenous “black identity,” and “feminist” is also a highly contested terrain. However, this thesis does not engage these terms so much as it analyzes the ambivalence that is produced when they are put together, calling to mind the body of work that is signified by “black feminism.” The section “not-caring for Latinx” in Ch. 3 engages the ambivalent categories of “black” and “gay” in some detail.

I begin this case study on Latinx poetics through an analysis of intersectionality in the context of black feminist poetics. Chapter One, “In Defense of Intersectionality,” fleshes out the perceived antagonism between intersectionality and queer/assemblage theory. Through Jennifer Nash’s work, I postulate that this divide produces a *set of signification* in which black women’s labor is implicitly relied upon as a result of this antagonism. Gumbs’ *Spill* guides this claim, as it produces several “territories” that intersectionality inhabits, thus aligning intersectionality’s multifaceted production with a reliance on black feminism and black women’s bodies.

Chapter Two, “In Defense of Latinx,” is about the minoritizing (re: identity-based) claims to Latinx identity and the related prescriptions toward the signifier’s use or disuse. This chapter expounds upon the notion that Latinx works as an analog to the term intersectionality, as it is perceived that people must always be “for” or “against” the term’s use. This attitude toward Latinx is reflected in Jennifer Nash’s description of the “intersectionality wars.” Comparably, prescriptions toward the embodied, identity-based nature of Latinx have proliferated in the last ten years. I understand the Latin “x” to be an intervention that relies on discourses of intersectionality for its proliferation on the contemporary medium of social media. This chapter is a testament to the import of engaging Latinx in this moment, as it gains momentum in popular and academic discourse. I offer that Latinx as an identity aligns with intersectionality in the intersectionality/assemblage set of signification.

Chapter Three, “I Don’t Care for Latinx,” takes a specific look at Latinx as a signifier via assemblage theory. The “x” in Latinx bears the affective load of racialized anti-essentialism, as it aligns the term Latin alongside queer and assemblage theory. Latinx affect is different from Latinx poetics because the deployment of embodied prescriptions is a critical (contradictory) element of poetic vacillation, which I do not interpret as a critical element of Latinx affect. José

Muñoz's work proves instructive in this chapter as Latinx is read as an example of what he describes as a "commons of the incommensurate."<sup>11</sup>

Chapter Four, "On Black Feminist Poetics," offers that the movement between identity-based claims to subjectivity and anti-essentialist claims to subjectivity is a poetic methodology. This act points toward the reparative potential of black feminist poetics. *Spill* and *Yo-Yo Boing!* employ minoritized claims and anti-essentialist claims simultaneously and ambivalently through a vacillation amidst subjectivity and affect. Black feminist poetics put intersectionality and assemblage theory in conversation with one another, offering alternative to the binary set of signification that marks a perceived intersectionality/assemblage theory divide. I offer that poetic language is a mechanism for realizing material and reparative visions of a less violent future.

Chapter Five, "On Latinx Poetics," offers a reparative vision of the ways in which poetic language negotiates Latinx as a contested identity and Latinx as a vibrant anti-essentialist analytic. Latinx poetics thus complicate Latinx's binary position in the intersectionality/assemblage theory set of signification. I offer the notion of *false cognates* as a framework through which Latinx poetics renegotiate the intersectionality/assemblage set. By grounding this discussion in black feminist poetics, Latinx poetics offer a localized and vibrant alternative to the implicit and often violent reliance on black women as theoretical and material sources of unrecognized labor in spaces of liberal multiculturalism on social media and in women's studies/Latinx studies disciplines.

The stakes of a Latinx poetics are both material and reparative in nature. I want to offer these two terms as another perceived binary site that black feminist poetics negotiate and complicate. Material stakes are invested in mitigating violence upon the tangible lives of multiply

marginalized people. They engage political claims toward subjectivity. This thesis is invested in the material lives of racialized queer bodies, which implicitly includes trans and gender non-conforming Latinx people as well as black women. Material stakes ask, how does “Latinx” bring visibility to trans people of color, allowing for the political mobilization to defeat transphobic policies such as North Carolina’s HB2 “Bathroom Bill”? How does intersectionality infuse its logic into the #BlackLivesMatter movement to center black trans women in conversations on police violence? These are two material questions regarding the stakes of signifiers such as Latinx and intersectionality. Material stakes are bound, but not limited to, bodies in the world; as Eva Hayward posits, materiality “recognizes...the boundedness of [one’s] flesh as part of the world.”<sup>12</sup>

Each chapter places a contingent and material “claim” regarding the validity of its content, and often these claims contradict one another. This is why I understand each chapter as an act of contingent politics. Chela Sandoval makes a strong case for the validity of contingency and contradiction in her essay “U.S. Third World Feminism” through the notion of differential consciousness. For Sandoval, differential consciousness “depends on the ability to read the current situation of power and of self-consciously choosing and adopting the ideological form best suited to push against its configurations.”<sup>13</sup> The material stakes of this thesis adapt and transform, “adopting the ideological form” of different political moments. I take Sandoval’s fluid notion of contingency and see that an analysis of black feminist poetics is similarly dynamic. Each chapter takes a contingent stance toward its content. If, in chapter one, intersectionality is sketched as a “territory” of black feminism that requires defending, then that is one contingent “claim” of this thesis. If chapter four argues that intersectionality is, in fact, *not* a territory, then that is another valid and contingent claim in this thesis. To argue for contingency is to avow that

contradiction can exist within the body of this text, and that each claim can offer material paths toward mitigating violence against marginalized peoples.<sup>h</sup>

Purely material stakes do not circumscribe the bounds of my investments in this thesis. The notion of the reparative avows the material stakes of the present without pigeonholing one into violent presentist logics. As José Muñoz claims, the reparative “helps us to consider something other than the unveiling of that thing we kind of already knew anyway.”<sup>14</sup> The reparative does not prescribe visions of less violent futures; rather, the reparative “opens up” possibilities for social reorganization in which current notions of race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability etc. do not circumscribe the bounds of future social relations. This difference between material and reparative stakes is underscored in Eve Sedgwick’s critique of “paranoid” readings. In her introduction to the edited collection *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, Sedgwick places paranoid readings in opposition to the formative work of reparative readings. Paranoid readings rely on suspicion as a methodological framework for critical analysis; a paranoid reader always expects the violence before it occurs, risking a tautology in which critique “can’t help or can’t stop or can’t do anything other than proving the very same assumptions with which it began.”<sup>15</sup> Sedgwick claims that paranoid readings have come to dominate contemporary<sup>i</sup> literary criticism, “unintentionally impoverishing the gene pool of literary-critical perspectives.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>h</sup> For example, the language and theory of Latinx materially impacts lives by increasing the political visibility of trans and GNC Latinx people.

<sup>i</sup> Though Sedgwick’s essay was first written in the 1990s, I offer that “paranoid reading practices” are still a profoundly operative force in academic and popular criticism. In my own experience, I’ve found that the term “problematic” is representative of a paranoid practice. Peers are quick to call cultural appropriation, racism, sexism, etc. as “problematic” instances without critically engaging the underlying forces that sustain such practices. I am definitely not claiming that there are not “problems” with the aforementioned instances; I am arguing that the term “problematic” always assumes knowledge of the “problem” without critically engaging the problem itself. Paranoid practices exist in popular and academic culture today.

Paranoid readings are a brand of prescriptive logic: they search for what is already known (or believed to be known), effacing the possibilities of new, unforeseen relations and developments that might exist within the object of analysis.

To limit the stakes of this thesis to purely material interests would be to engage in a paranoid reading practice. Temporally speaking, material stakes are bound by a present tense imagination regarding the relationship between identity and the violence differentially enacted upon various identities. While we must attend to this violence, reparative readings allow for the possibility that it does not always have to be this way, that the relationship between violence and subjectivity can change in unknowable and unforeseen ways. The reparative imagines possibilities in which violence is not linked to presently stable notions of identity; it is a stake that is invested in altering paradigms of socially differentiated violence. My intervention in this thesis is to underscore the relationship between material and reparative stakes. Ultimately, this negotiation works to mitigate violence against marginalized people through both imaginable and unimaginable ontologies.

## Chapter One: In Defense of Intersectionality

*“As intersectionality proliferates as a term in academic and popular feminist discourse, black feminists are increasingly brought into the fray to argue for its use and disuse.”* –Jennifer Nash

This chapter explores the various “claims” toward the meaning and validity of intersectionality in feminist and identity-based theorizing. In this section, I am not arguing for the validity of one claim over another; rather, I am tracing the effects of the proliferation of intersectionality’s meanings with regard to black feminism and black women. I read each of these claims as *territories*, via Jennifer Nash’s critique, as a way to map the contested and varied topography of intersectionality. As the claims upon this analytic multiply, so do the stakes. The result is that this term is seen as a territory that requires defense: contestation produces an analogous refusal. I contextualize this defensive attitude toward intersectionality in terms of a perceived binary set of signification which pits intersectionality against assemblage theory. Ultimately, this proliferation in meaning and antagonism in social media and in women’s studies disciplines requires the labor of black feminists—implicitly black women—to defend intersectionality as a contested territory. Nash argues that “the symbol of the black woman is called upon to perform work...for U.S. women’s studies...even as [U.S. women’s studies maintains little interest in the materiality of black women’s bodies.”<sup>17</sup>

Eve Sedgwick offers a useful framework for understanding the proliferation of identity-based (re: territorial) claims regarding subjectivity. She offers a formulation on “minoritizing” and “universalizing” discourses as an alternative to the essentialist/constructivist binary analytic.<sup>18</sup> While Sedgwick is working with minoritizing/universalizing constructs around the term queer, I specifically want to locate the minoritizing view as it pertains to the term

intersectionality in this chapter. A minoritizing view is one that locates terms such as “queer” as an identity, using queer as a noun (e.g. *He is a queer, cis man*). The minoritizing view has been linked to biological and deterministic logics, such as the “born this way” argument. However, a minoritizing view is not coextensive with a biologically prescriptive viewpoint. In a contemporary United States context, queer as identity can still be deployed as a signifier for a group of LGBTQ+ identifying people without being rooted in biological determinisms.

Minoritized discourses produce contestation because people have different views as to who “is” or “is not” part of that identity. Intersectionality often deploys minoritized notions of identity (such as queer, Latino, or disabled) to demonstrate the compounding effects of multiple marginalization. For example, some might suggest that black women inhabit a minoritized territory of intersectional marginalization. Others argue that everyone has an intersectional identity that is configured by minoritized categories that each carry different relationships to privilege and oppression. I understand the various territories of intersectionality as a proliferation of contested minoritizing claims regarding identity and violence.

### *Defining Intersectionality*

As active as the discussions about Latinx has become in the past several years, the term “intersectionality” is perhaps an even more vibrant flashpoint of feminism and identity politics. Even the word “buzzword” has become a “buzzword” when talking about intersectionality. On one hand, whole feminist ethics are based on the term. The website Everyday Feminism markets itself as “Intersectional Feminism for Your Everyday Life.”<sup>19</sup> The UCLA Gender Studies department defines its area of study as “an interdisciplinary field that focuses on the complex interaction of gender with other identity markers such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, nation, and

religion.”<sup>20</sup> Leslie McCall calls “intersectionality...the most important theoretical contribution that women’s studies, in conjunction with other fields, has made so far.”<sup>21</sup> Feminism’s embrace of intersectionality has resulted in myriad claims that are based in minoritizing logics.

The origin, history, and bounds of intersectionality are contested. However, there is no dispute about its *coinage*. The word originates with Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 from a legal context, where she sought to address how the law does not account for black women’s intersecting experiences of race and gender oppression. Since then, intersectionality has proliferated in meaning, consequently multiplying the stances that activists and academics take in relation to the term. For those who maintain a certain purity toward the 1989 coinage of intersectionality, I offer this quotation from Crenshaw in 2017:

Some people look to intersectionality as a grand theory of everything, but that’s not my intention. If someone is trying to think about how to explain to the courts why they should not dismiss a case made by black women, just because the employer did hire blacks who were men and women who were white, well, that’s what the tool was designed to do. If it works, great. If it doesn’t work, it’s not like you have to use this concept.<sup>22</sup>

Crenshaw is alluding to the material stakes of intersectionality which might argue for its deployment in legal contexts to mitigate the erasure of black women. As the term proliferates, this definition offered by Jennifer Nash in 2008 provides a little more room for nuance: “intersectionality rejects the ‘single-axis’ framework...[it] underscores the multidimensionality of marginalized subjects’ lived experiences.”<sup>23</sup> This definition offers that intersectionality is an

analytic that recognizes the interlocking nature of identity; that is, race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, etc. are social categories that inflect one another. Some argue that this multivalence pertains to interlocking systems of oppression, such as white supremacy, patriarchy, classism, and ableism. Others argue that intersectionality is an analytic that can describe anyone's identity, even those who hold patriarchal, racial, sexual, and class privilege (e.g. the wealthy straight white man).

I won't attempt to catalogue each and every definition of intersectionality. What's important is that *defining* intersectionality is an act that often presumes intersectionality's ties to minoritized identity categories. That is, various acts of defining intersectionality—in all their disagreement and contestation—share a commitment to “staking claims” on the meaning of this term. This results in the proliferation of intersectionality as a *territory*, one that is in constant flux. Perhaps this notion of territoriality is why Jennifer Nash alludes to the “intersectionality wars,” in which “debates on intersectionality quickly become referendums on whether or not scholars are ‘for’ or ‘against’ intersectionality.”<sup>24</sup> The “for” or “against” framework in Nash's postulation is particularly useful when thinking about territoriality. Territories have borders, definitions. You're either in or you're out. I see this kind of thinking in my own classes, where students (including myself) make bold claims regarding what “is” or “is not” problematic. For example, many in my gender studies capstone class noted that Jennie Livingston “is” problematic for making a film about queer people of color (*Paris is Burning*) as a Yale-educated white lesbian. By deploying intersectionality as a tool to highlight what “is” or “is not” problematic, my class and I reify the notion that intersectionality ties whiteness to violent power and racialized queer bodies as sites of marginalization. I am not arguing that claims regarding what “is” or “is not” intersectional are bad or untrue. These are claims invested in the material

life of intersectionality, a life that is seeking to remedy violence against black women in the legal system, for example. I only wish to underscore that these myriad deployments create various territories defined by inside/outside, for/against borders that intersectionality inhabits.

### *“Spilling” Intersectionality*

Alexis Pauline Gumbs’ *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity* produces various “territories” that configure multiple definitions of intersectionality. To be clear: the text does not explicitly use the term intersectionality.<sup>j</sup> Furthermore, the production of “territories” is not the only work that this text performs. What’s important is that *Spill* interacts with black womanhood and black feminism in a way that exemplifies the multivalent territoriality of intersectionality.

From the onset, *Spill* has an intimate relationship to topographical thinking. The cover artwork features a piece by Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, in which a disembodied head emits a partial map representation of the west coast of Africa. The fragmented nature of this map nods to the fact that the production of territories in this book is never complete or coherent. Rather, these territories are continually articulated, much like the map that is physically emitted from a mouth on the cover of the book.<sup>25</sup> In the body of the text, *Spill* offers footnotes after each vignette, linking to a citation of a black feminist theoretical text. Importantly, Gumbs notes that “every footnote in *Spill* goes back to Spillers and the “bibliography” does not cite one white person or one man. Not one.”<sup>26</sup> Gumbs thus re-claims space in her text for black women, excluding white and male subjects from the text. These citations become a territory that is defined by

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<sup>j</sup> Indeed, intersectional discourse via Crenshaw is largely deployed in the legal realm. Legal deployments strongly contrast with the poetic nature of *Spill*. *Spill* cannot be easily read as a text that has investments in the legal realm. However, this difference does not proscribe a reading of *Spill* in terms of intersectionality, as I claim later in this section.

contemporary racial and gender politics that rely on stable notions of identity. In contrast, the notion of "fugitivity" plays a critical role in re-defining territories in the text. For example, Gumbs claims, "I want to *break space* to understand [Harriet Tubman] as a fugitive not only from the external structures of slavery, but also from the pain of interpersonal relationships structured by violence"<sup>27</sup> (emphasis mine). Through Harriet Tubman, *Spill* denies a territory that is defined by contemporary racial and gendered politics—as these politics are structured by histories of slavery and anti-blackness—and instead "breaks" and thus makes new space for Tubman's invocation. The text affirms a territory that abides by current racial and gendered politics via a bibliography that excludes white people and men; simultaneously, the text "breaks the spaces" that are structured by affirmations of these same racialized and gendered power differentials by claiming a *different* territory of fugitivity for Harriet Tubman. The text thus delineates several contrasting and coexisting territories for black women and black feminist fugitivity. I understand these territories to be myriad "minoritized" attachments to identity that exist within the text.

Intersectionality becomes coextensive with many of the territories in *Spill* given the specific contemporary racial and gendered politics that inflect these territories' production within the text. I noted earlier that intersectionality is an act that often uses minoritized claims of identity to "underscore the multidimensionality of marginalized subjects' lived experiences."<sup>28</sup> As the citations in *Spill* very intentionally only include women of color, I claim that the citational space is an intersectional territory in the text. Critically, the exclusion of white people and men from the citation translates into the centering of black women's experiences in the text. This is different than saying an exclusion of white people and men centers non-white people and non-men. In this instance, an intersectional politics of exclusion implicitly translates into the act of

centering the lived experiences of black women. Jennifer Nash claims that within discourse on intersectionality, “there is an ongoing collapse between racialized and gendered bodies and their objects of study.”<sup>29</sup> This “collapse” refers to the claim that intersectionality is coextensive with black feminism (which is implicitly coextensive with black women). I extend Nash’s critique onto the territories of *Spill*. The fact that a book on “Black Feminist Fugitivity” excludes non-men and non-white people from its citations shows that there is a slippage in meaning between intersectional politics and black feminism. As the citational space in *Spill* explicitly centers the work of women of color as an intersectional territory, it implicitly claims itself as a space for black women through the reliance on Hortense Spillers as the crux of its citational practice. Within *Spill*, intersectionality “collapses” in meaning onto black feminism and black women.

#### *The Intersectionality/Assemblage Theory Set*

If intersectionality is increasingly produced/perceived as a territory, then its borders are increasingly defended against attack. Queer theory and assemblage theory are often understood as its most potent antagonists. The latter two analytics deal with anti-essentialism, affect,<sup>k</sup> and movement: all notions that disengage from stable notions of identity. I will engage the “what” of queer and assemblage theories further in chapter three; for now, I argue that mobilizations against anti-essentialist critiques of intersectionality shore up the “defense” of intersectionality’s territory.

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<sup>k</sup> On affect, from Nash in “Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality”: “I use the term affective politics to describe how bodies are organized around intensities, longings, desires, temporalities, repulsions, curiosities, fatigues, optimism, and how these affects produce political movements (or sometimes inertias)” (3).

As a notable proponent of assemblage theory, Jasbir Puar has become what Nash describes as the “ubiquitous critic” of intersectionality.<sup>30</sup> That is, Puar is perceived to metonymically represent a threat to intersectionality through her robust commitments to assemblage theory/vocal criticisms of intersectionality. If black women are seen as coextensive with projects of intersectionality, then Puar is seen as coextensive with a “threat” to intersectionality: assemblage theory. Puar describes this perceived antagonism between intersectionality and assemblage theory in the essay, “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess”:

What the tension between the two purportedly opposing forces signals, at this junction of scholarly criticism, might be thought of as a dialogue between theories that deploy the subject as a primary analytic frame, and those that highlight the forces that make subject formation tenuous, if not impossible or even undesirable.<sup>31</sup>

Puar notes that intersectionality is often understood to deploy “the *subject* as the primary analytic frame,” while assemblage describes “*forces* that make subject formation tenuous, if not impossible” (emphasis mine). This dichotomy shores up the territory of intersectionality as one that is circumscribed by affirming attachments to identity, identity politics, and/or subjectivity.

Nash argues that black feminists’ perceived proprietary relationship to the term intersectionality produces the notion that an antagonistic “ubiquitous critic” exists. She contends that intersectionality as a captive, territorial term produces fictive antagonisms that are inherent in “for” and “against” thinking. She does not blame black feminists for this production, nor does she argue that the antagonistic ubiquitous critic is being imagined out of thin air. Rather, she

claims that U.S. women's studies as a discipline demands of black feminists and black women the theoretical and embodied forces that will "save" feminism. Black women thus "guard" intersectionality, which, for many, implicitly means that black women "guard" the heart of contemporary feminism. Following the notion that intersectionality is argued to be coextensive with black feminism (as its property) and thus black women, that assemblage theory is coextensive with queer theory and thus Jasbir Puar, a binary set of signification begins to take shape:

identity	vs.	affect
intersectionality	vs.	assemblage
(black) feminist	vs.	queer
black women	vs.	the "ubiquitous critic" (re: Jasbir Puar)

I want to be very clear: this set is a *perception* that describes the effects of contemporary attitudes and deployments of intersectionality in conversation with assemblage theory. I am describing a binary set, not espousing or denying its truthfulness. Furthermore, the ordering of this set does not imply that the identity vs. affect antagonism is the engine of this set. Rather, each side has a corresponding "counterpart," which generally aligns with its counterpart in terms of specificity/realm of debate. I do not mean to offer a causal relationship that traces black women as the "endpoints" or "conclusions" of identity-based thinking. Rather, I am aligning intersectionality alongside various minoritized meanings. This alignment is produced through an antagonism to assemblage. Ultimately, the proliferation of intersectionality as a discourse has produced various antagonisms and minoritized claims that collapse discourse onto the bodies of

black women and other women of color (such as Puar). This next chapter analyzes Latinx as another actor in the intersectionality vs. assemblage set.

## Chapter Two: In Defense of Latinx

*“The X-ing Out of Language: The Case AGAINST ‘Latinx’”* –article title in *Latino Rebels*

*“The Case FOR ‘Latinx’: Why Intersectionality is Not a Choice”* –article title in *Latino Rebels*

This chapter traces the production and effects of a proliferation of minoritized claims regarding Latinx. While social media and the internet have been instrumental in producing territories and antagonisms for Latinx, I also want to stress that intersectionality has been a central propelling mechanism for discourse on Latinx. As intersectionality itself is minoritized and collapsed into the subjects of black feminism and black women, the proliferation of Latinx implicitly works off of the bodies and labor of black women.

This chapter engages what Latinx *is*, rather than what it *does*. I am looking at the minoritized (dis)contents of Latinx, but I want to keep the minoritized claims of intersectionality on the burner. Implicit in the “what” of Latinx is the recognition that the proliferation of meaning regarding this signifier is tied up in the minoritized attachments of intersectionality as sketched in chapter one.

### *The Proliferation of Minoritized Latinx Claims*

I won’t attempt to offer an account of every single claim regarding the meaning of Latinx. A simple google search offers myriad newspaper articles and think-pieces that outline a particular writer’s take on this signifier.<sup>1</sup> On January 1, 2018, the progressive Latin culture media outlet

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<sup>1</sup> In the edited collection “Theorizing LatinX,” Claudia Milian’s essay parses through the meanings of Latinx in a robust account of the cultural significance of the “X” as a signifier,<sup>1</sup> Nicole Guidotti-Hernández gives an in-depth look at the history of other identity signifiers such as Chican@, Xicana, and Nuyoricana in conversation with Latinx,<sup>1</sup> and Richard T. Rodriguez sketches online debates regarding Latinx in the essay, “X marks the spot.”

known as *Remezcla* posed a question on their Twitter account: “How do you pronounce ‘Latinx?’” 46 percent said La-TEEN-x. 42 percent Latin-x. 6 percent La-TINKS. And 6 percent said, “some other way.”<sup>32</sup> The content, platform, and colloquial nature of this Twitter poll is indicative of the development of the discourse on Latinx in the United States. Much of the debate on this signifier—as of right now—focuses on the nitty-gritty. *How do you say it?* This debate is often played out on social media. *Where do you see it?* And the term is almost always in question. *What does it mean, who is it for?* This is not to say that Latinx hasn’t become institutionalized in more formal spaces, such as at the academic level. For example, in 2016, Iris Ruiz and Raúl Sánchez co-edited a collection called *New Latinx Keywords for Theory and Pedagogy*.<sup>33</sup> The August 2017 issue of *Cultural Dynamics* is devoted to “Theorizing LatinX.” In a forthcoming 2018 book, Ed Morales calls Latinx “*The New Force in American Politics and Culture*.” Yet, Latinx is often propelled by millennial politics, on social media, in think-pieces and Facebook posts.

The volatility and volubility of Latinx on social media (and on the internet more broadly) allows for myriad definitional flashpoints regarding the signifier to be explored in an accessible manner. A Facebook post by artist Ricardo Gamboa in response to Daniel Hernandez’s essay in the LA Times sheds light on the way Latinx operates in social media. In his opinion piece called “The Case Against Latinx,” Hernandez offers this final judgement: “Like many of its awkward predecessors, Latinx does not work.”<sup>34</sup> Hernandez argues that the “x” linguistic construction makes no sense in the Spanish language. Furthermore, Hernandez claims, “‘Latinx’ is definitely *not* used by working-class immigrant adults.” It is a Facebook response by self-identified genderqueer, Mexican-American artist Ricardo Gamboa that underscores the varied production of Latinx on social media. Gamboa sarcastically retorts, “Ladies, gentlemen, genderqueer and

transdeities... Don't worry your pretty little heads with self- and collective-determination: Cis-, gay 'Latin' reporter Daniel Hernandez has figured everything out for you."<sup>35</sup> Gamboa proceeds to make a critical judgement of their own, noting, "The one thing [Hernandez] got right is that not all Latinos should identify as Latinx—because it's a term articulated by and for genderqueer and trans Latinxs."

This interaction suggests two definitive claims regarding Latinx. There is Hernandez's rejection of the term; there is Gamboa's prescription that Latinx is "by and for GNC Latinxs." These tensions will be explored later. I would like to focus the beginning of this genealogy on the volatile production of Latinx via the intimacy and accessibility of social media. In their post, Gamboa embraces a familiar tone through sarcasm ("Daniel Hernandez has everything figured out for *you*" (emphasis mine)). Furthermore, Gamboa's post links to Hernandez's article, coupling the public Facebook articulation of Latinx to yet another online opinion on the definition of Latinx. As an artist who has gained popularity through features on online platforms such as *Remezcla*, Gamboa deploys Latinx through a mesh of internet relations. Different meanings of Latinx are being produced through tags, hyperlinks, and social media commentaries at a clip that defies standardization. The sheer rate of Latinx's online production demands an avowal that it is, plainly, a messy and contested term.

It's important to locate social media as an engine to the production of meaning (and debates on the meaning) of Latinx. Nicole Guidotti-Hernández argues in her essay, "Affective communities and millennial desires, or why my computer won't recognize Latina/o," that "speed of delivery and the ability to immediately, within seconds, redistribute the content, like a post, or pin a photo has a profound effect on Latinx being used first in common language and then filtering into the academy."<sup>36</sup> Claudia Milian avows the importance of social media to the inception of the

special issue “Theorizing Latinx” when she recalls the edited collection’s initiation, asking, “Could we trouble that Facebook virtual status [regarding Latinx] further, deepening the discussion of that cranked up and not terribly attractive X? What came next is the encounter in *Cultural Dynamics* on “‘Theorizing LatinX.’”<sup>37</sup> While there are certainly myriad other reasons for having an academic collection on Latinx, Milian underscores the importance of social media for kickstarting the collection of essays on the meaning of Latinx in *Cultural Dynamics*. Through its genuine accessibility and colloquial nature, social media disseminates discourse on the meaning of Latinx. Furthermore, social media engages institutional deployments of Latinx. A friend of mine once posted a “guide a latinx friend...made on the history and use of the word ‘Latinx.’ Latinx is a word that Duke is starting to use, but it's not just about using the term-- it's about understanding its history and place as well.”<sup>38</sup> The guide was a summer research project from a Princeton PhD candidate exploring the “historical context of the term “Latinx”...[creating] a space that both respects nonbinary individuals and takes into concern broader community concerns.”<sup>39</sup> Latinx vacillates in and out of social media, scholarly engagements, and institutional deployments, multiplying in meaning and contradiction with each post, essay, and theoretical engagement it receives.

In this multiplicity of minoritized claims to Latinx, there is no consensus as to what the signifier means. We can begin with Gamboa’s Facebook post in response to Hernandez’s piece in which Gamboa contends, “not all Latinos should identify as Latinx—because it’s a term articulated by and for genderqueer and trans Latinxs.”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, in his initial rejection of the term, Hernandez engages a different minoritizing view, trading Latinx for “Latin,” claiming, “if you must, I’m Latin. She is Latin. He is too. And so are they.”<sup>41</sup> The minoritizing view is often

deployed on social media. The internet personality Queer Xicano Chisme offers commentary and “chisme...as practiced by many Chicanx/Latinx folks.”<sup>42</sup> They go on to describe their page as one that will “center the lived experience and embodied knowledge of the administrator...to empower and be a voice (re: not THE voice) for queer Xicanitos.” In this instance, Queer Xicano Chisme locates their identity as a Latinx figure (through Xicano), without resorting to a common pitfall of representational politics with the qualification that they are not “THE voice” for queer Latinx people. Within minoritizing discourse, Latinx has been used to describe trans, GNC, and nonbinary Latin-identified people. It has also been used as an identity term for all Latin-identified people (this is a common practice in my own social circles; there is a Latinx student retreat open to *all* Latin-identified students at Duke). The minoritizing view has very flexible definitional limits, as some have gone on to describe Latinx (as a noun) for the marginalized positions that Central American people and undocumented immigrants inhabit in the United States.

### *Latinx in the Intersectionality/Assemblage Set*

While social media is a critical mode for the proliferation of Latinx claims, I argue that intersectionality is a central political and theoretical force that propels Latinx discourse. Often, Latinx is seen as an intersectional remedy that accounts for the intersections of queer identity and racialized Latinidad. For example, in the article, “The Case for Latinx: Why Intersectionality is Not a Choice,” authors María R. Scharrón-del Río and Alan A. Aja provide arguments that support Latinx’s use because of its inclusivity toward trans and gender non-conforming Latinx people.<sup>43</sup> Their points categorically address different claims in response to an article that argues against the use of Latinx.<sup>44</sup> Despite the invocation of the term “intersectionality” in the title of

their article, Scharrón-del Río and Aja do not deploy the word “intersectionality” until the very end of their piece, when they conclude, “Recognizing the intersectionality of our identities as well as our locations within the various systems of privilege and oppression —on a personal and social level— fosters solidarity with all of our Latinx community and is also necessary to engage in liberatory praxis.”<sup>45</sup> In this way, arguments for Latinx’s efficacy toward highlighting minoritized identities rely on an uncritical invocation of the term intersectionality. This presents an issue on two levels: 1) the social categories that constitute the “intersectionality of our identities” remain unexamined and unchallenged, and 2) intersectionality is invoked without any mention of the labor that black feminism and black women’s bodies perform to shore up its political effectiveness as a rhetorical argument. Latinx requires intersectionality to be politically effective. As Nash argues that women’s studies disciplines call upon black feminism and black women’s bodies to “improve feminism,” I argue that “Latinx” in social media, in academic institutions, and in scholarly engagements calls upon black feminism and black women’s bodies *implicitly* through intersectionality to improve Latin(x) studies. With this in mind, I want to reconfigure the intersectionality/assemblage set sketched in chapter one to account for Latinx:

identity	vs.	affect
intersectionality	vs.	assemblage
<b>Latinx identity</b>	<b>vs.</b>	<b>Latinx affect<sup>m</sup></b>
(black) feminist	vs.	queer
black women	vs.	the “ubiquitous critic” (re: Jasbir Puar)

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<sup>m</sup> See chapter 3 for more on “Latinx affect”

Again, I am not arguing for a hierarchy of signification in which these alignments cascade or cause one another. Rather, I am aligning their meanings along the bases of their attachments to identity. By aligning minoritized claims to Latinx with intersectionality, I suggest that Latinx is implicitly (and specifically *not* explicitly) operating off the work of black feminism and black women.

With the argument that Latinx deployments rely on black women's labor, I run the risk of effacing popular, institutional, and scholarly representations by and about afro-latinx identity, specifically with regard to the work of black Latina women. Afro-latinidad troubles my postulation that Latinx relies on the labor of black women through its implied differentiation between Latinidad and blackness. Certainly, discussions on afro-latinx identity produce even more minoritized claims that inflect the production of the term Latinx, specifically as they pertain to anti-blackness in Latinx communities. I maintain that Latinx (and its relationship to black feminism and black women's bodies) remains undertheorized regarding its relationship to intersectionality. Perhaps one could add "afro-latinx" to this set and maintain that black feminism and black women—including black Latina women—are implicitly providing the intellectual and embodied labor for Latinx's production. If popular, academic, and institutional discourses on Latinidad often efface the relationships between Latinidad and blackness, then this thesis does not wholly escape that erasure. It is important to note, however, that this erasure does occur on a substantial level outside of this thesis, inflecting the material realities regarding the labor of black women (including black Latina women) on social media and in academia. My formulation on the intersectionality/assemblage set still describes the effects of this erasure, even

as it perhaps reifies the very erasure it seeks to describe.<sup>10</sup> This set outlines the *perceived* antagonisms between intersectionality and assemblage, which—perhaps problematically—implicates the *perceived* absence of afro-latinx identity in popular, institutional, and academic discourse.

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<sup>n</sup> For some examples of the robust scholarship on afro-latinx feminism, see: Angela Jorge’s “The Black Puerto Rican Woman in Contemporary American Society,” Ana Maurine Lara’s “Bodies and Memories: Afro-Latina Identities in Motion,” Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores’ *The Afro-Latin@ Reader*, Nancy Raquel Mirabal’s *Suspect Freedoms: The Racial and Sexual Politics of Cubanidad in New York, 1823-1957*, and many of the writings in Anzaldúa and Moraga’s anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*.

<sup>o</sup> For some popular, social media driven engagements with afro-latinx feminisms, see: “Expanding The Dialogues: Afro-Latinx Feminisms” in *Latinx Talk*, “So You’re Afro-Latinx. Now What?” from *The Root*, “Can You Be Black and Latinx? Here’s What Afro-Latinx Means And Why It Matters” from *Everyday Feminism*, “Professor Dixia Ramirez discussing Afro-Latinx feminisms” from Yale University’s *Ethnicity, Race, and Migration* site, and “Anti-Blackness In Latinx Countries Is Systemic And Reinforced By Deliberate Cultural Policy” in *Afropunk*.

### Chapter Three: I Don't Care for Latinx

*"I am interested in how a radical ethic of care, rather than an assertion of shared injury (when, of course, the great insight of black feminist theory has been to showcase that injury is never really shared; identity-work always requires elisions), can form the basis of a public."* –Jennifer Nash

If the first two chapters of this thesis explicate how minoritized claims to Latinx align with the deployment of minoritized identities within intersectional thought, then this chapter outlines how Latinx affect aligns with the "other" side of the aforementioned set of signification: assemblage theory. How does the notion of "not-caring" for minoritized claims within Latinx align with Sandra Soto's notion of "de-mastery"? How might Puar's work—set up as a contrast to notions of an identity-based intersectionality—characterize Latinx as a possible site of assemblage and affect?

#### *Not-Caring for Latinx*

In his seminal memoir *Down These Mean Streets*, Piri Thomas feels some kind of way about the Latinx "faggots" down the block: "'*Sarito*, ain't those faggots the sickest motherfuckers yet?' ...*imagine getting your peter pulled like a motherfucking straw.*"<sup>46</sup> When I read this passage in a university class, I was not surprised that it received a level of disgust and reproach I've come to expect from my peers in the humanities. This reaction is justified. Yet, I respond to Thomas's inflammatory remarks like this: *I don't care.*

What is care? Is it a privilege not to care? It is clear that for someone who does not have a lot of money, their livelihood depends on caring about bills, jobs, and paychecks. It is clear that

for an undocumented immigrant in 2018, fighting for DACA is a justified act of caring. Especially for those who bear multiple forms of social marginalization, it is clear that caring about policy that deals with the rights of trans women, black people, and working-class people, for example, is not only justified, but is a necessary act of survival. To care is to fight for policies that don't promote systemic violence against black trans women. To care is to enact necessary tactics and forms of resistance in order to survive—emotionally, physically, politically, spiritually, intellectually, and in everyday life. I want to make a distinction between “not-caring” and “apathy.” Apathy requires the privilege to ignore certain kinds of violence precisely because that privilege depends on the oppression of others. Apathy is a means of self-interest that is invested in projects of hegemonic white supremacy, patriarchy, and other manifestations of violent power structures. For this thesis, I differentiate “not-caring” as a tactic that stems from the lived experiences of multiply-marginalized subjects, one that strives toward mitigating systemic and acute violence.

It's important to care that I don't care about Thomas's attitude toward Latinx “faggots.” Theorist Darieck Scott might agree. Responding to a quotation in which Joseph Beam notes that he doesn't really *care* about the black community, even as Beam lives as a black gay man himself, Scott notes that he felt a “fierce sense of liberation” after reading the statement.<sup>47</sup> There follows a qualification noting the temporally contingent status for this lack of care: “I think he knew that he would take it back, that he meant it, but not absolutely, not forever, and that he might just as vociferously claim the opposite at a different moment.”<sup>48</sup> Scott also writes as a self-identified black gay man. He argues that the ability to articulate a lack of care toward the black community was a recognition that depressurized the relentless social push toward loyalty for a community that, at times, delegitimized his homosexuality (specifically as it pertained to his

loving desire for a white man). Importantly, Scott is arguing for a brief sense of liberation from a prescriptive voice in identity politics. In this vein, to contingently say that one does not care about their community—specifically the community to which their race, gender, sexuality and/or class aligns—is not to disavow that community. It is to find relief from the delegitimization of an intersecting marginalized identity. It is to say that, for the moment: *I don't need to make a concession. I don't need to trade queerness for race, or race for queerness. I simply don't care right now.* There is something reparative about that.

José Muñoz furthers a discussion as to why multiply marginalized people (such as “queers of color”) might deploy tactics of “not-caring” through his explication of incommensurate subjectivities in the essay, “Race, Sex, and the Incommensurate: Gary Fisher with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.” Muñoz engages Fisher’s personal diaries which contain graphic narrations of his experience as a black gay man who sexually desires domination from white men. At first glance, Fisher’s work doesn’t make sense. Or perhaps it is catalogued as irrelevant to a politics of liberation; his racial fetishism is perhaps interpreted as reliant on racist hierarchies and stereotypes. Yet, Muñoz embraces the notion that Fisher’s desire is nonsensical, positing that this nonsense exemplifies the fact that queer, non-white subjectivities are incommensurable with dominant narratives of sexual desire. That is, Fisher’s desire is only non-sense when weighed in relation to (re: commensurate to) the expectation of what his desire as a black gay man should be. Rather than pigeonhole Fisher’s work into irrelevance, Muñoz reframes Fisher’s desire as a metonym that looks toward the possibility of a “commons of the incommensurate.”<sup>49</sup> This “commons” is made up of a “plurality of the senses, which is not one’s own senses but instead the multiple senses of plural singularities.”<sup>50</sup> Plainly, queer of color desire sometimes doesn’t make sense in relation to dominant expectations of sexual desire because the *politics* of desire

reduces subjectivity to its ability to relate, equate, and commensurate. Reduced to this politics of equivalence, Fisher's diaries do not make sense. Instead, Muñoz offers that "we can read Gary Fisher as a gay black man whose sense of self was incommensurable with an immediately available notion of black male identity."<sup>51</sup> Here we can reflect on Scott's reading of Beam in which he articulates that "not-caring" about the black community was a way to "critique...a vision of community in which [Scott is] not permitted to commune because of [his] 'other' identity."<sup>52</sup> Scott, Beam, and Fisher can be read as subjects who demonstrate the incommensurability of subjectivity, as they, at times, lack equivalence with notions of a homogenous racial community.

#### *Latinx Affect and De-mastery*

In the book, *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer: The De-mastery of Desire*, Sandra K. Soto offers that "de-mastery" is a "departure from certainty, mastery, and wholeness, while still announcing a politicized collectivity."<sup>53</sup> De-mastery aligns with Muñoz's notion of incommensurability, as it attends to what Soto describes as the "complex, unsettled, porous (and I do mean to be wordy here), mutually constitutive, unpredictable, incommensurable, and dynamic...processes of social formation."<sup>54</sup> Through Muñoz's articulation of the "commons of the incommensurate," and Soto's notion of "de-mastery," I offer that Latinx can attend to the affective forces that highlight the tenuousness of subjectivity. As noted earlier, "affect" describes "intensities, longings, desires, temporalities, repulsions, curiosities, fatigues, and optimisms" that destabilize notions of identity.<sup>55</sup> For example, Fisher's affective desire for sexual/racial subordination undermines the notion of a stable category of black male identity. The "x" in Latinx is the key to its affective potentiality as a tool for de-mastery. Milian notes that the "x" in Latinx is contradictory: "The X

is unconventional. The X is multiplying. The X is complicated. The X is funky. I like the X. I don't like the X."<sup>56</sup> Through an avowal that the "x" is a contradiction, Milian points out that Latinx is always a contingent signifier. If the meaning of minoritized subjectivities in Latinx is contingent (in social media, in theory, and in institutions), then Latinx "disrupts...our desire for intelligibility, our desire for a quick and visual register of a gendered body."<sup>57</sup> Latinx is a tool of de-mastery that attends to the incommensurability of subjectivity that racialized queerness embodies.

The proliferation of minoritized Latinx "nouns" signals a decisive methodological shift toward Latinx as an affective analytic. To describe such a proliferation of Latinx "nouns," commentators—mostly scholars, both on and off social media—have located Latinx as a productive analytic tool. Latinx is becoming a verb, a method that seeks to articulate the affective appeal of this signifier. Social media is a crucial site that facilitates this relationship between minoritizing and anti-essentialist discourse. It allows for anyone to have a (self)determination as to who can or should identify as Latinx through posts and links to articles. Yet this accessibility has garnered a proliferation of meaning that contradicts and exceeds stable categorization—the work of this excess signals the turn toward a queer theoretical analytic for Latinx. This theoretical turn is clearly articulated in Nicole Guidotti-Hernández's essay when she notes that Latinx has "the capacity...to carry the excessive affective overload and political responsibility for all Latinos."<sup>58</sup> Guidotti-Hernández grounds her claim in a minoritizing discourse, noting that Latinx uses "discursive strategies to centralize queers, trans, ability, and racial-ethnic diversity."<sup>59</sup> However, she locates the digital realm as the medium that facilitates her anti-essentialist claims toward Latinx's political use for "all Latinos."

*Latinx and Assemblage in the Intersectionality/Assemblage Set*

In the past two sections, I have offered various terms to describe the queer potentiality of Latinx: “not-caring,” the “commons of the incommensurate,” “de-mastery,” and Latinx “affect.” However, I have intentionally labeled the set of signification as one that pertains to an antagonism between intersectionality and *assemblage*. On one hand, I understand these aforementioned terms as signifiers that are all related to one another. They each offer nuance to the notion that subjectivity is not concrete or additive. On the other hand, assemblage theory is a particularly potent example of the antagonistic relationship that de-mastery/affect/queer theories supposedly have in relation to identity-based theories such as intersectionality. As Puar writes in *Terrorist Assemblages*, “intersectional identities are the byproducts of attempts to still and quell the perpetual motion of assemblages, to capture and reduce them, to harness their threatening mobility.”<sup>60</sup> I align “Latinx affect” on the “side” of assemblage in this set as a shorthand manner of describing the various ways that Latinx destabilizes concrete notions of subjectivity.

The notion that Latinx aligns with assemblage theory nods to the reparative qualities of Latinx. For example, while demonstrating incommensurability, Scott finds relief and liberation in not-caring. Muñoz hints that “Fisher’s insistence on the incommensurable over equivalence... may be a certain kind of freedom.”<sup>61</sup> I offer that Scott’s move toward contingent not-caring is a tactic that avows Muñoz’s notion of the commons of the incommensurate, one that ultimately offers reparative possibilities for multiply marginalized subjects. A tactic of not-caring is reparative because it allows for debates regarding the complexities and contradictions of subjectivity to exist and develop without stagnating into prescriptivist logics. José Muñoz recognizes that the reparative “helps us to consider something other than the unveiling of that thing we kind of already knew anyway,”<sup>62</sup> calling to mind the fact that the reparative is not

bound by the material discourses of the present that are already “kind of known already.” Sedgwick’s notion of paranoid readings can be understood alongside the politics of equivalence and commensurability that Muñoz problematizes as a site of restrictive violence. If we are always reading to make sense of something, then we extinguish the possibilities of non-sense and incommensurability. Not-caring avows the possibility of non-equivalence and incommensurability; to not care (at times) as a reader is to not be a paranoid reader. To offer a literary criticism with the contingent response “I don’t care” is to allow for a “reparative reading position [that] undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks.”<sup>63p</sup>

However, an attitude that solely regards Latinx as a territory of assemblage theory reifies the binary structure of the intersectionality/assemblage set. Often, intersectionality becomes a foil to the affective potential of terms such as Latinx. For example, Soto claims, “‘intersectionality’ is perhaps too spatially rigid and exacting a metaphor to employ when considering the ever dynamic and unending processes of social formation.”<sup>64</sup> With this claim, Soto reifies the notion that the tenuousness of subjectivity is in direct conflict with a theory of intersectionality. Nash claims that via antagonistic discourses, women’s studies as a discipline relies on black feminism and black women to “defend” intersectionality. Soto’s work on demastery shores up this antagonism through the explicit denial of intersectionality as a framework that challenges the stability of identity.

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<sup>p</sup> Sedgwick’s work on “love” might offer a contradictory stance on “care,” as it is precisely her “care” for others (such as her care for Michael Lynch in the piece “White Glasses,”) that operates as a means to disrupt and destabilize normative attachments to identity. However, I maintain that my analysis of “not-caring” is in line with Sedgwick’s notions of “caring for,” as both ultimately strive to destabilize stable categorizations. I search for reparative stakes via a tactic of “not-caring”; simultaneously, one can search for the reparative via a tactic of “caring for.”

I further this claim to note that the affective power of Latinx as an analytic for assemblage also calls upon black women's labor. This critique can be applied to Soto's work: she claims that the "intimate personal experiences of...1980s women of color (often lesbians)...call into question the often claustrophobic strictures of identity politics." She immediately follows this claim, noting that that 1980s women of color feminisms are "encapsulated by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith's groundbreaking work, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*."<sup>65</sup> In this account, Soto articulates that "women of color feminisms" are "encapsulated" by a text written by three black women. Notably, the full title of Hull, Scott, and Smith's text is *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. Soto explicitly and implicitly does not include the specificity of "Black Women's Studies" in her analysis of women of color feminism's challenges to identity politics (though she does specify that many are "often lesbians"). In Soto's formulation, the work of black women and black feminism is relied upon through the invocation of Hull, Scott, and Smith's text, yet black feminism and black women are elided from explicit mention within Soto's work. In this sense, racialized and queer accounts of de-mastery, assemblage, and affect often rely on black feminism and black women's labor by naming women of color feminisms as a force that challenges stable notions of identity without explicitly naming black women's (often prototypical) stance as the primary referent of women of color feminisms.

I do not want to discount the power of minoritizing or affective analytics regarding Latinx. Rather, I want to highlight how both of these attitudes simultaneously efface the work of black feminism and black women while implicitly calling upon their labor to shore up an

argument regarding the meaning of Latinx. These next two chapters offer an alternative to this material and immaterial violence.

## Chapter Four: On Black Feminist Poetics

*“What are ways of valuing intersectionality beyond making it into a territory that we fiercely guard?”* –Jennifer Nash

*“I feel, therefore I can be free.”* –Audre Lorde

Black feminist poetics defy any single definition. Rather than attempt to define what black feminist poetics *are*, I’d like to outline one aspect of what black feminist poetics *do*. I’ve already sketched how intersectionality can deploy identity in a way that reiterates attachments to stable notions of subjectivity. I’ve shown that assemblage theory highlights the forces that make subject formation tenuous, and that this difference puts assemblage theory in an antagonistic position against intersectionality. I’ve claimed that this creates a binary set of signification that relies on black feminism and black women’s labor, often without explicitly naming and recognizing that work. This chapter explores how black feminist poetics offer an alternative to this set by explicitly naming black feminism and black women’s labor as a wellspring of theory and experience from which material and reparative gains can be made in the lives of multiply marginalized people. I offer that black feminist poetics do not wholly deny the intersectionality/assemblage theory set. Rather, black feminist poetics negotiate the material/political stakes of intersectionality with the reparative stakes of assemblage to productively obfuscate the boundary between these two analytics.

### *Black Feminist Poetics and Defamiliarization*

As a self-identified black lesbian woman, Audre Lorde has offered important contributions to black feminist thought via her work with organizations such as the Combahee River Collective.

In the essay, “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” Lorde describes the import of poetry as a vital element for empowering women of color in the face of acute and systemic violence. In the essay, Lorde notes that “she speaks here of poetry as the revelation or distillation of experience, not the sterile wordplay that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean.”<sup>66</sup> She furthers her distinction of poetry from “sterile wordplay” by a disavowal that “the head will save us.” Poetry “gives name to the nameless so that it can be thought...For there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt.”<sup>67</sup> Embracing the act of feeling is a central component of Lorde’s definition of poetry. She postulates that poetry is a way of articulating lived experience. It imagines worlds/words of liberation that cannot be articulated under a paradigm that only recognizes the validity of European “rational” thought, a paradigm that invalidates the necessity of poetic language for women of color. Lorde claims that poetry envisages a different world and allows women of color to understand themselves in a different light, one that is not the sterile fluorescence prescribed by the “white fathers.”

While Lorde is speaking of poetry as it relates to women of color, I want to take a moment to further delineate what is meant by “poetry” and “poetic language” in this thesis. While I attach my analysis of poetics to a contemporary U.S. black feminist framework, the notion of “defamiliarization” from 18<sup>th</sup>-century Russian Formalism proves informative for delineating the nature of poetic language. Viktor Shklovsky first coined the term “defamiliarization” in the essay, “Art as Technique” (1917).<sup>68</sup> Defamiliarization is a literary device that “makes the familiar strange by not naming the familiar object...[it] describes an object as if [one] were seeing it for the first time.”<sup>69</sup> Shklovsky notes that the device of defamiliarization operates through poetic language, which is the “difficult, roughened, impeded language” that renders familiar objects unfamiliar. Critically, Russian Formalists differentiate

poetic language from prosaic language; this division does not correspond solely along the genres of poetry and prose. Rather, “poetic language... covers all literature that is deliberately structured to present an artistic impression... prose works included.”<sup>70</sup> Prosaic language, on the other hand, renders objects flat and stagnant: “The object, perceived in the manner of prose language, fades and does not leave even a first impression.”<sup>71</sup> Without artful, poetic language, an object becomes “automized” and “habituated”; that is, “the object is in front of us and we see it, but we do not know about it.”<sup>72</sup> I understand black feminist poetics and Latinx poetics to employ poetic language, not only through poetry, but across various genres that allow one to see identity and violence in a new, defamiliarized light.

The #SayHerName campaign is a salient example as to how black feminist poetics operate through defamiliarizing black women’s identity.<sup>9</sup> #SayHerName is formally operated as a campaign under the African American Policy Forum (AAPF), headed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (the same woman who coined intersectionality). According to the AAPF website, “The #SayHerName Movement responds to increased calls for attention to police violence against Black women by offering a resource to help ensure that Black women’s stories are integrated into demands for justice, policy responses to police violence, and media representations of victims of police brutality.”<sup>73</sup> Clearly, #SayHerName has well-defined attachments to stable notions of identity as it invokes the racialized and gendered category of “Black women” in its calls for political and social change. However, #SayHerName is not entirely circumscribed by these material and identity-based attachments. The “#” invokes its rapid dissemination across the

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<sup>9</sup> I use #SayHerName as an example of black feminist poetics to create an analog with current usages of Latinx. This is by no means meant to be representative of the entire character or body of work that represents black feminist poetics. The work of Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Ama Ata Aidoo, Cheryl Clarke, Toni Morrison, Chinelo Okparanta, and M. Nourbese Phillip, to name only a few, offer other examples of black feminist poetics.

internet. Google trends data shows that #SayHerName reached peak internet search activity in July of 2015, corresponding with the death of Sandra Bland while she was in police custody.<sup>74</sup> The internet-based mobilization of this movement—as signified by the “#” that is invoked even when it is not being used to tag something—allows for its rapid deployment in response to highly visible acts of police violence against black women. The “#” offers a sense of contingency to the visibility politics of “SayHerName,” thus putting the identity-based category of “black women” in productive conversation with the “forces that make subjectivity tenuous,” i.e. the rapidly shifting public attitudes and affects toward police violence against black women. #SayHerName performs the work of black feminist poetics by negotiating attachments to subjectivity with the shifting public affects that are represented in the internet and on social media.

When Lorde writes, “I feel, therefore I can be free,” she centers the validity of identity-based experience to her notions of poetic language. She claims that “poetry is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, then into an idea, then into more tangible action.”<sup>75</sup> #SayHerName centers the lived experience of black women (often transgender black women)—this is an avowal of the validity of the “hopes and dreams” of women of color that Lorde references. I am not claiming that there is something romantic about police brutality against black women. I am claiming that black feminism’s revolutionary and contingent attitude toward identity informs the work that #SayHerName accomplishes. The “#” in #SayHerName is the manifestation of Lorde’s understanding of “idea” and “tangible action”: these are contingent political tactics that respond to the shifting public affects toward state violence against (transgender) black women. Black feminist poetics operate in the everyday, currently, fighting for material and reparative gains for black women through social movements such as #SayHerName.

#SayHerName defamiliarizes representations of police violence which often center around narratives of black men and/or the police officers within mainstream media outlets. #SayHerName re-makes the “familiar” perception of police violence by centering the narratives of black women, often explicitly transgender black women. As Melissa Brown notes on Blackfeminisms.com, “citizen journalism is particularly significant in highlighting violence against transgender women of color.”<sup>76</sup> By citing “citizen journalism” as a key to bringing visibility to violence against transgender women of color, Brown alludes to the ability of the “#” to engage a wider audience outside of institutionalized media outlets. In this way, this movement has attachments to identity through its attempts to center the narratives of transgender women of color. At the same time, the campaign’s ability to account for a diverse set of public affects—in this case, “citizen journalists” on the internet—is *inseparable* from these identity-based attachments. That is, the campaign is not “SayHerName.” Its *hashtag* “SayHerName.” The affective power of the “#” is integral to the identity-based politics of visibility in “SayHerName.” Ultimately, the “#” shapes the character of the #SayHerName movement as one that simultaneously embraces identity politics while maintaining a dynamic relationship to rapidly shifting affects across the public domain of the internet and social media. This re-negotiation of the intersectionality/assemblage set attends to the material lives of black women as it pulls from the reparative potential of assemblage theoretical models.

### *Poetic Language in Spill*

Gumbs’ *Spill* is a robust example of a text that uses poetic language to defamiliarize stable discourses of identity, specifically toward black women’s identities. *Spill* is a text that works to “break down a certain dispossession with which narrative form complies.”<sup>77</sup> Through the

combined use of footnotes, dictionary definitions, and poetic vignettes, the structure of the book “spills” over traditional models of narrative writing, flowing into different planes of meaning-making.

The narrative structure of *Spill* employs poetic language, and the juxtaposition of poetic vignettes with Spillers’ theoretical work via footnote references is a site of defamiliarization. In an interview, Gumbs comments that she “sought a methodology that would allow [her] to write *with* Spillers instead of continuing to merely write *about* her work.”<sup>78</sup> The text complicates the “familiar” or “prosaic” notion that poetry and theory are not intimately enmeshed in one another. *Spill* allows for readers to see Spillers’ theoretical work from a new angle, one that is borne from black women’s ephemeral scenes of domesticity portrayed in the main content of the text. This is not to say that Spillers’ work did not engage the lived experiences of black women before being put in conversation with *Spill*. Rather, I argue that the route from *Spill*’s vignettes to Spillers’ theory “makes the familiar strange,” as it reorients the reader’s engagement with Spillers’ theory. The form of *Spill* defamiliarizes the boundary between poetry and theory via narratives of black women’s identities.

Black women are often rendered “familiar objects” in hegemonic discourses via racist and sexist stereotypes. The notion that intersectionality exists solely within the domain of identity-based theorizing concretizes black women’s positions in relation to this violent stereotyping. However, *Spill* does not abide by the notion that black women and intersectionality are solely attached to stable notions of identity. The text defamiliarizes black women’s subjectivities through language that simultaneously centers black women’s experiences while consistently addressing an unnamed referent. For example, *Spill* portrays ephemeral scenes that reference an ambiguous “she”; as Gumbs explains in an interview, the text works to “actively

disrupt the development of a coherent character that can allow any reader to say that this is about someone specific.”<sup>79</sup> However, *Spill* is clearly an homage to black women, as “these scenes belong to their grandmothers, their recent selves, their fellow fugitives, their own dreams.”<sup>80</sup> To be clear, certain specific women are points of reference in the text. Gumbs writes on page 39 of *Spill*:

*For Harriet Tubman*

this can never be equal to this. every way she set the table. every form of rice she put on the other side of sugar, every stitch through cotton and the numbness of her fingertips. nothing is not even equal to nothing. knowing is not equal to no. so she renamed herself after her mother, left her dirtbag husband, looked up at her north star god and said “let’s go.”

Harriet Tubman can contingently be read as the “she” in this passage. The knowledge that Tubman followed the “north star god” to lead escaped enslaved persons to the North allows for this interpretation. However, the “she” pronoun may also apply to black women in contemporary contexts as well—the “north star god” may be a metaphor of freedom from an abusive husband. The “she” remains open-ended, and “she” is guided by the invocation of a revolutionary black woman. The “familiar object” of black women’s subjectivity becomes unfamiliar through an ambiguous pronoun, all while remaining grounded in a particular anti-racist and anti-sexist history. The reader sees the subject of “she” in new light, allowing for black women’s subjectivities to be perceived through artistic impression. Pronouns become a site that enact identity-based attachments (i.e. to black women). Simultaneously, these pronouns avow the

forces that make identity tenuous by holding onto the ambiguous “she.” *Spill* exemplifies black feminist poetics because it attends to the material life of black women while opening up reparative possibilities of “she” who can free herself from certain patriarchal and racist violences.

### *Black Feminist Poetics Complicate the Intersectionality/Assemblage Set*

In the previous two sections, I have shown that black feminist poetics articulate attachments to identity, simultaneously deploying dynamism and indeterminacy to account for shifting public affects. The #SayHerName campaign navigates transgender black women’s visibility alongside the moving affective terrain of the internet that marks this visibility as tenuous. *Spill* deploys the ambiguous “she” pronoun to account for specific black women’s identity at the same time that it accounts for the complexity and tenuousness of this identity. I argue that this negotiation marks black feminist poetics as a body of work that complicates the notion that the intersectionality/assemblage set must always consist of diametrically opposed “sides.”

In the essay, “Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality,” Nash understands “black feminism’s pleas for love as a significant call for ordering the self and transcending the self, a strategy for remaking the self and for moving beyond the limitations of selfhood...[which is] a kind of affective politics.”<sup>81</sup> I understand these “pleas for love” as an example of black feminist poetics. Nash recognizes that black feminist love-politics “orders the self” *and* “transcends the self,” that it “remakes the self” and engages an “affective politics.” Rather than deploying an either/or attitude toward subjectivity and affective politics, black feminist love-politics engage a contingent “both/and” attitude toward this perceived binary. My intervention in Nash’s analysis is to articulate the specific “newness” of

this “both/and” attitude, which is the defamiliarizing power of black feminist poetics. In the sense that black feminist love-politics re-negotiate the binary antagonism of identity vs. affect, “love-politics” defamiliarize the intersectionality/assemblage set. This is the work of black feminist poetics.

This work extends to complicate the perception that material and reparative stakes are antagonistic. If material stakes are understood in alignment with subjectivity/identity, and reparative stakes are understood in alignment with affect, then we can add stakes to the intersectionality/assemblage set of signification:

identity	vs.	affect
intersectionality	vs.	assemblage
<b>material</b>	<b>vs.</b>	<b>reparative</b>
(black) feminist	vs.	queer
black women	vs.	the “ubiquitous critic” (re: Jasbir Puar)

However, black feminist poetics complicate the relationship of these stakes in the set. For example, in “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” Lorde takes care to delineate that the poetry she is addressing has both *political* and *revolutionary* stakes: “Poetry coins the language to express and charter [a] revolutionary awareness...However, experience has taught us that action in the now is always necessary.”<sup>82</sup> Lorde offers that for women of color, poetry can simultaneously negotiate the material and reparative (re: political and revolutionary) stakes that shape their differential experiences of violence. Importantly, Lorde claims that these two claims must come in tandem, that you can’t have one without the other. She notes that “when we view living, in the european

mode, only as a problem to be solved, we then rely solely on our ideas [re: politics] to make us free.” On the other hand, Lorde recognizes that “our children cannot dream unless they live, they cannot live unless they are nourished, and who else will feed them the real food without which their dreams will be no different than ours?”<sup>83</sup> Knowing that material experience must be accounted for in concert with reparative imagination, Lorde claims that “women carry within ourselves the possibility for fusion of these two approaches as a keystone for survival, and we come closest to this combination in our poetry.”<sup>84</sup> I locate Lorde’s description of poetry that weds political/material stakes with revolutionary/reparative stakes as a testament to the work of black feminist poetics.

I’ve noted earlier that the notion of an intersectionality/assemblage binary set relies on black women’s labor to “defend” intersectionality and minoritized identity constructions. Often, this labor goes unrecognized, or is relied upon in a way that constricts or misconstrues the history of black feminism and the work that it has contributed to affect/assemblage theory. As black feminist poetics obfuscate the intersectionality/assemblage binary set, they also open up possibilities for understanding black feminism and black women’s labor outside of the context of this set. Materially speaking, this might undermine the reliance of black women in academia to “defend” intersectionality. As a reparative, this opens up new possibilities for “being” in the world, such that identity and affect are not locked in paranoid tension.

## Chapter Five: On Latinx Poetics

### *On False Cognates*

I'm watching a telenovela with a friend. It's called *Caer en Tentación*. We've hit episode forty-five. Blame our binges on the Catholic nuns that schooled my mother in her elementary years. They were the ones who'd walk around the classroom holding rulers that carried a slight bent from slapping knuckles. The same knuckles that belonged to kids who spoke Spanish in the classroom, kids like my mom. The point is that my mom never taught me Spanish. My dad? He's too—how might he put it—*embarazada* to try and teach me. “Watch a novela in Spanish. They're over-dramatic; it'll be easy to understand the Spanish.” And so my education is pawned off to the TV producers of *Caer*.

*Caer* is kitsch. (Two lovers are married to two friends with kids who cheat on their girlfriends with the lawyer of the lover who was injured in a jealous rage by one of the friend's employees.) But I am learning, I am hearing the Spanish. Roughly. Incorrectly. Case in point: the two main lovers have a *cabaña* where they elope on the weekends. It's in the woods, it carries a crackling hearth, there is a couch where they choose to have sex rather than on the water bed in the adjacent room. My friend and I are discussing their affair; I ask her how it's possible that they never get caught cheating while in the cabana.

Cabana?

I think you mean *cabaña*.

I think I meant cabana.

She's corrects me: “*Cabaña* means cabin, dipshit. Not cabana. What is this, some hut on the beach? They're in the woods.”

(She grew up with Spanish).

To be a cognate is to “descend from a common ancestor.” Or, it is to be “descended from the same original language; of the same linguistic family.”<sup>85</sup> A false cognate offers a deceit toward this shared ancestry; it promises consanguinity and belies that fact. Google translate will tell you that *cabana* is the third operative translation of *cabaña*. Yet, this was clearly not the case in *Caer*. A *cabana* invites white sands and wind-blown drapes. No doors. Margaritas. Rather than woods and a crackling hearth, a *cabana* houses a full moon, a beach, the exotic. The curve of the tilde becomes the wave of some gulf.

I bought the lie; I believed in *cabaña* as *cabana*. I believed in the linguistic slip amidst woods and beaches, chalked it up to “cultural nuance.” (*Caer* is set in Mexico). The false cognate is a familiar liar. Is the false cognate dangerous? Maybe I’ve set it up that way: the woodsy *cabaña* cum *cabana* exoticizes Mexico as the hot, steamy paradise of touristic imagination. But there exists promise in the false cognate, in the slippage of meaning that arises from familial—I mean familiar—mistakes. I do not want to focus on the meaning of certain false cognates, or the violence that comes from some of these slippages. (Though it is important to discuss the exoticization of the Global South, that is simply is not the focus of this chapter.) Rather, I want to focus on the methodological production of meaning that the false cognate deploys. Familiarity: false cognates promise a specific linguistic ancestry—they are linguistically familial/familiar. Betrayal: false cognates do not, in actuality, abide by said ancestry. The familiar betrayal of the false cognate relies on families (of meaning). It is through this lens that I understand the errancy of Latinx poetics.

### *Latinx and False Cognates*

Latinx is a false cognate. Latinx is close to Latino/a, Latin@, Latino, Latina. Five sixths of the word are the same; Latinx is begging to be recognized as a member of the Latin signifier family. Latinx is lying in a cabana, luring readers into the tempting acknowledgement of its consanguinity with these purported genealogical predecessors. But what of the pesky “x”? All those other terms have some “a,” or “o”—the “x” isn’t even a vowel. The “x” might not even abide by a gender binary, of which the “a” and “o” have strong ties. Perhaps the “a” and “o” are the conservative *tíos* (*tíx*’s?) of the family, “x” the millennial college grad. Sound familiar? Latinx as a false cognate understands the signifier as “familial” with other Latin signifiers *at the same time* that it understands Latinx as a unique, differentiated signifier. This is not to say that the Latin in Latinx is ahistorical, without lineage, or without roots. No: there is a clear genealogy and a history of naming practices that allows for the development of Latinx as a false cognate signifier.

This loaded history is what allows for the incommensurability of Latinx in relation to other Latin signifiers. Nicole Guidotti-Hernández historicizes the “x” in her essay, “Affective communities and millennial desire: Latinx, or why my computer won’t recognize Latina/o.” She locates an initial recuperation of the “x” as “a means of mapping the Indigenous mythical homeland of Aztlán in the US Southwest.”<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, the “x” was deployed in 1976 “to break boundaries around gender, proper femininity, self-defense, the defense of a people in a women-centered fashion” through the work of Chicana feminists. Ultimately, Guidotti-Hernández avows that “the early use of x, as an indigenizing, ethnic nationalist impulse, alongside its other cognates like Nuyoricana or Xicana, creates an extended engagement with nationalisms in linguistic formations that are related in the claims that they make but not

necessarily in the content.”<sup>87</sup> The myriad deployments of the “x” as different Latin nationalisms grant it anti-essentialist potentialities. That is, the “x” is a prescriptive body in the same moment that it belies prescription through its various contingencies. The prescriptive body of “Latin” transmogrifies alongside the differentiated historical “content” of the “x.”

Importantly, our contemporary moment conjures a robust argument toward the minoritizing notion that the “x” recognizes gender non-conforming individuals. This represents another embodied and minoritizing shift that adds to the “affective load” that the “x” carries. Without negating previous prescriptions that the “x” espoused (i.e. toward indigeneity, Xicana movements and more), the current predominant understanding of the “x” as signifying gender non-conformity adds another body of signification to the “x’s” catalogue. As Guidotti-Hernández notes, “solving gender equality in the field of practice and in the Spanish language itself is not the end game. Here, the x accomplishes a critique of gender centrality in gender-neutrality or fluidity” (151). This comment points toward the poetic nature of Latinx. Guidotti-Hernández recognizes the contingent nature of the “x” when she notes that, “*Here*, the x accomplishes...” (emphasis mine). The “x” as prescription signifies “here.” The “here-ness,” or the present-ness of the “x” as gender non-conformity allows for the recognition that it can be used, strategically, for trans and GNC rights as a material political strategy. Accompanying this politic is the continuous avowal of the “x’s” contingency: “solving gender equality...is not the end game.” In this sense, Latinx is a term that is both in the “here and now” as it also nods to a future that has not yet been imagined. Latinx continuously defamiliarizes minoritized claims toward its meaning.

The “x” is not consanguine with other Latin signifiers. There is a betrayal here. Note how Guidotti-Hernandez describes the “the early use of x...alongside its other *cognates*” (emphasis mine). This language underscores the perception that the “x” is a cognate to other “Latin”

signifiers. However, the “x” operates as a unique negation. It is an imperative toward impossibility, irreconcilability. Latin? No. Latin? I don’t know. Latin? “x.” The a/o and @ qualifiers do not offer this irreconcilability. They operate on planes of commensurability toward one another. They do not challenge the political assumptions of their “true cognate” families; that is, Latin@ is commensurable to Latina, Latino, Latina/o. They are related in claim *and* content. It is true that Latinx contingently describes the same bodies that a signifier such as Latina/o might describe. However, it is the contingent, dynamic nature of the “x” over time and contexts that makes Latinx a false cognate to Latina/o, Latin@, Latino, Latina.

The “x” is what allows for the turn toward assemblage theory: the x avows the “commons of the incommensurate” that José Muñoz articulates in the essay, “Race, Sex, and the Incommensurate.” When Muñoz writes about Gary Fisher’s desire for sexualized racial subordination, he comments that, “we can read Gary Fisher as a gay black man whose sense of self was incommensurable with an immediately available notion of black male identity.”<sup>88</sup> Similarly, Latinx is a “sense” of the self that does not equate to “immediately available notions” of Latin identity because of its “x.” One may be inclined to equate Latinx with these other signifiers, as one is inclined to commensurate (and subsequently judge) Gary Fisher against normative notions of black identity, of homosexuality. This equivalence accepts the falseness of the false cognate as a flat truth. On the other hand, the “commons of the incommensurate” denies familiar and familial linguistic consanguinity. Incommensurate subjectivities cannot relate to one other—though they do exist amidst one another. The “x” renders the Latin in Latinx incommensurate to the Latin in Latino/a, Latin@, Latino, and Latina. In this sense, Latinx is a false cognate to these other signifiers.

*The False Cognate in Yo-Yo Boing!*

Does the presence of Spanish in *Yo-Yo Boing!* make it a Latinx text? Is it the fact that Braschi is Puerto Rican, that her subjectivity informs the reader's understanding of *Yo-Yo Boing* as Latinx? Yes—these normative, prescriptive signifiers contribute to the “Latinness” of *Yo-Yo Boing*. I affirm these material prescriptions toward Latinx identity for the moment. And I offer this affective turn: these are not the only reasons why *Yo-Yo Boing!* is Latinx. In fact, I have just stopped caring about Braschi's identity as a Puerto Rican. I do not care anymore that Spanish has a material attachment toward normative understandings of Latinx identity.

*Yo-Yo Boing!* deploys rambling dialogue that flips between Spanish and English in a way that exemplifies the errancy of Latinx poetics. The opening section of the text is written completely in Spanish. The middle section riffs between Spanish and English, switching mid-sentence, lingering for paragraphs in English, then Spanish, indenting and italicizing at will. There are very few quotation marks in *Yo-Yo Boing!*, even though the text largely consists of dialogue. Importantly, the Spanish in *Yo-Yo Boing!* is not differentiated from English through italics, *como* the works of Sandra Cisneros, Gloria Anzaldúa, and other Spanish/English code-switching texts. Italics connote difference. The italicized word is a slip: *whoops*. Yet, italics that serve to differentiate Spanish from English are becoming a normative mess. English is proper; English has good posture; the Spanish has the *hunched back*; it bears the semantic weight of non-normativity. *Yo-Yo Boing!* does not abide by this increasingly institutionalized form of linguistic differentiation. Instead, *Yo-Yo Boing!* is populated by messy language, incorrect language. Seemingly at random, the text's language “yo-yo's” amidst Spanish and English.

It is this errant dynamism that creates a diverse array of “bodies” within *Yo-Yo Boing!*.

For example, the second section of the text is an extended conversation between two protagonists. They are engaged in an argument on page 53:

—You are the one who is pointing at me. You are the one who is pointing at me. You are pissing me off. You are really pissing me off.

—Don't repeat yourself. I heard you. Don't repeat yourself. I said what I said. Do not point that finger at me. Take that finger away.

—You are repeating yourself too many times.

In this frustrating exchange, each speaker identifies the other one as the one “pointing fingers,” which is the act of accusing someone of a wrong-doing. They say, “Don't repeat yourself...Don't repeat yourself,” contradicting their own imperative. These speakers embody contradiction. However, through an antagonistic relationship, neither claims to be “like” the other; that is, as bodies, each speaker remains separate and distinct through accusation and disdain (“You are pissing me off”—“you” and “me” are different). Though they are distinct bodies, they still confuse: the reader asks, *who is pointing at who? Who is repeating themselves? Who is this “who” that I'm talking about?* It's maddening, and playful. It is a funny exchange. This playfulness runs deep throughout the text. The use of the “you” pronoun to “point out” attachments to a subject while simultaneously obfuscating the identity of the subject is strongly reminiscent of the ambiguous “she” pronoun in *Spill*. Notably, the “she” in *Spill* maintains attachments to black women's experiences, while *Yo-Yo Boing!* does not.

Furthermore, the “you” which is repeated against the speaker's own advice resonates with the “yo-yo” of *Yo-Yo Boing!*. In their introduction to the text, Sommer and Vega-Merino

argue that “the pronominal shifters (you, yo) mark the shifts [in subject positions] more than the locus of speech” (11). That is, traditional methods of naming and quotation marks do not delineate changes in speaker in *Yo-Yo Boing!*. Instead, the “you” and “yo” act as false cognates for each other that mediate the change in speaker. They bleed in to one another, they act as if they were of the same family of meaning, of subjectivity. Yet they mean different things—“you” are not “me” like “yo” is “me”—right? Furthermore, the use of “you” and “yo” creates a spectacle of revelation (and revelry) that comes from revealing the falseness of the false cognate. The reader revels in the mismatch of “you” and “yo”—the subjects are confounding, they are angry, they are contradicting themselves. The speakers’ exchange edges on absurdity. They would be *embarazadas* if they knew the reader were watching. Ultimately, the speakers themselves become false cognates of one another; they are linked by “you” and “yo,” but are revealed to be distinct and different through comic argumentation. *Yo-Yo Boing!* deploys these false cognates to muddle clean distinctions amidst subjects in the text. The “pronominal shifters” are the mechanism for delineating and shifting bodies: as false cognates, they create a disorientating understanding of “who is who” within *Yo-Yo Boing*. The necessary errancy of contradictions and false cognates in *Yo-Yo Boing!* defamiliarizes subjectivities in the text; they let the reader see these subjects in a new, confounding light. *Yo-Yo Boing!* thus articulates a multiplicity of bodies within its text without prescribing a single notion for what those bodies represent. The use of false cognates and errancy through multilingualism deploys a method of Latinx poetics.

*The Intersectionality/Assemblage Set as False Cognate*

I offer that poetic language defamiliarizes Latinx's location within the intersectionality/assemblage set. This is because Latinx poetics can regard this binary set as a set of false cognates. The past two sections detailed how the "x" in Latinx creates a sense that Latinx has normative attachments to identity at the same time that it regards Latin subjectivity as tenuous. This logic can be applied toward the relationship between Latinx identity and Latinx affect in the intersectionality/assemblage set. Latinx poetics—acting as false cognates—allow for the simultaneous avowal of the validity of Latinx as identity and Latinx as affect. However, by positing that this validity only exists in terms of the false cognate, the identity vs. affect binary is seen less as an antagonism, and more as a collection of signification, and of familiarity. In this way, Latinx poetics do not regard the intersectionality/assemblage set as consisting of territories that must be defended, but rather as a set of "familial" signifiers that, at times, contradict one another, revealing themselves as false cognates.

It is imperative to show that the work of Latinx poetics as a false cognate is intimately related to the work of black feminist poetics. I do not mean that the Latinx false cognate is an effect of black feminism or black women's labor. I want to continue to examine the ways in which black women are implicitly involved in discussions regarding an intersectionality/assemblage divide. I offer that seeing intersectionality as a false cognate to assemblage theory defamiliarizes the territory of intersectionality. The false cognate undermines the territoriality of intersectionality—it allows for a simultaneity of being that does not construe intersectionality as a stable territory that must be defended. In this sense, perhaps Latinx can work to mitigate disciplinary "calls" for black feminism and black women to defend

intersectionality. Latinx poetics open up material and reparative possibilities for a world in which violence is mitigated against racialized queer bodies.

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